

29 November 2020: Isaiah 64:1-9 (Advent 1, Year B)

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...to make your Name known to your adversaries... (Is 64:1-2)

This desperate plea is not melodrama. The exiled Jews were granted permission to return home. How bitter when they arrived. Jerusalem, as 50 years before when conquered, was in ruins. They must have thought: “This is God’s holy city? If God wants Jerusalem rebuilt, then God better get to it: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’” If only God would build walls for our perpetual safety, clear away the ruins, make enemies disappear. If only God would set things right. Perhaps you have had such thoughts? I have!

The prophet comes to himself, and so should we. *Yet, O Lord, you are God. We are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand* (v. 8). God is not a magician; God is a potter. Potters use a hands-on approach. The potter cannot make something at arm’s length but must get intimate with the clay. No matter how obstinate the clay the potter keeps molding, keeps the vision in mind, perseveres in bringing form out of chaos. The divine potter works because of everlasting love regardless of our sometimes, tepid response, our disinterest, our not wanting God’s love. However, unlike a human potter, the divine potter’s work involves death. Jesus goes to the place of our greatest fear—the point of human annihilation—so that our deepest fear, our nothingness, is filled with the love and life of God. In Jesus, God fills death with life, through sacrifice.

There is cost for the clay, for us, too. It will not happen (snap) like that. God will not change us into something we are not, nor make the difficult, unwanted, or dangerous magically disappear. Our cost involves patience and trust: patience with God, others, and especially with ourselves; patience in living through and making amends for the consequences of our wrongs. Trust that God’s desires for us and for others really are best, that in God is our true life and freedom. Our willingness to be formed by God means living without the constant inner self-centered monologue about how things ought to be and how others ought to be, and how God ought to be making our path smooth through a pleasant land. Our cost may include God leaving us alone in front of *our* rubble for a time, so we may truly know our chaos without God.

The key is wanting God to form you, yearning for God to soften you, accepting that this is not the work of a moment, but of eternity; that there is no end to the beauty and usefulness that God will make of you. The key is wanting to become what God desires you to be, and content to let others be what God desires them to be. An early 20th Century monk, John Chapman, wrote: “You are the block, God is the sculptor; you cannot know what God is sculpting you for, and you never will in this life. All you need is patience, trust, confidence, and God does the rest. It is...simplicity itself.” (The Spiritual Letters of...).

Today we are confronted with the truth that no matter how many times we have fallen in the past, no matter the wreckage of our lives, no matter how ruined we are—God begins again. Every stumble, every fall is an opportunity to get back up. There is no magic involved—as the world understands it—but there is the promise of transformed lives. As we offer ourselves with patience and trust, we come to know God’s true miracle in our lives, and in the lives of others.

In faith, we offer God our chaotic lumps of clay, that God will mold in us a heart of flesh to replace the heart of stone; we offer ourselves, that God will form us with grace and truth; that God will transform our rubble into beauty, usefulness and holiness; that God will change our darkness into light, our death into life. We offer ourselves for conversion—to use the old word—so the work of God in us is set free, so Jesus Christ is known, worshipped and obeyed in our lives, in the Church, in the world made through and for Christ.

This is the joy of God’s heart: God forming us always and evermore into the likeness of perfect joy and life: Jesus Christ. For the work of the potter in us all and for the grace-filled invitation to begin again with each new year, each new day, each new breath—Thanks be to God!

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.